


11-21-1991

Bringing it Together, Downtown

Chester Smolski

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text

 Part of the [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Public Affairs Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smolski, Chester, "Bringing it Together, Downtown" (1991). *Smolski Texts*. 246.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text/246

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chester Smolski Collection at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Smolski Texts by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.

Bringing it together, downtown

THEY CAME, they saw, they discussed, they analyzed, and they made their ideas known to the populace. Now they wait for further comments from the citizenry before they provide their final written report in January.

Andres Duany, noted Miami architect, together with his team of consultants, have now finished the "charrette" that will serve as fodder for a plan of action to revitalize Providence's downtown. Conversations with several participants in the process deemed it a worthwhile exercise, and that the \$60,000 price tag (funded one-third by the city and two-thirds from the private sector) was money well spent.

Duany gave most of the major findings of the team's work, and some ideas that should be considered for the downtown, in a presentation at Trinity Theater on the last night of their intensive four-day schedule. Most of the approximately 350 enthusiastic and appreciative audience members, as judged by the applause, stayed through the nearly three-hour presentation.

Use upper floors of vacant downtown buildings for inexpensive housing lofts, do small projects that are easily funded, use the buses of RIPTA to move people about in the downtown, move the Travelers Aid facility to the edge of the downtown — these were some of the ideas proposed. And of course, coming from an architect, many ideas were suggested and illustrated that dealt with the physical makeup and suggested changes for the streets, alleys and buildings downtown.

CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

Perhaps the two most important points made by Duany dealt with the role of the downtown as a marketing attraction tied to the Convention Center, slated to be finished in late 1993, and the means to make these proposals happen by providing a downtown management entity.

The experience of other convention centers, according to Duany, is that there is an 18-month "honeymoon period" after their opening. The newness of our center will draw many conventioners to the facility, but what will be their experience once they get here? Will Providence be an upbeat city with a variety of activities, both day and night, to entertain these visitors and make them want to come back again? Duany stated that this leaves the city with little time to make several necessary changes that would enhance such potential activities.

Although Duany made only a brief reference to it, perhaps his most important statement of the evening was that all successful downtown revitalizations have occurred where there was a downtown management authority that pulled all the pieces together. Much like a mall, where shopping hours are uniform, security is tight, cleanliness is a given, marketing is presented as a package, and help is provided for merchants to better present and sell their goods. A downtown authority would operate in much the same manner.

The idea of such an entity for the

downtown is not new: A decade ago the Providence Planning Department and the Providence Foundation worked diligently to bring one to the city. Providence was not ready for such an innovative idea, even though it was operative in such places as Miami, Little Rock, Orlando, Atlanta and a host of other cities.

The suggestion that the proposed shopping mall for the Capital Center, Providence Place, could provide this service for the downtown in conjunction with their own management of the mall is not the answer. First, there is question as to when and if the facility will be built; and second, the present downtown needs such an entity for itself now. A professional staff, largely or completely drawn from the private sector, can work to bring about changes.

Implementing such a downtown development authority is not easy, but given the new impetus that Andres Duany and his team have brought to our city, perhaps this time all downtown interests will come together and work for the common good: a revitalized downtown.

The spirit exhibited by the audience at the final presentation displayed a sense of optimism and hope — qualities not evident in Rhode Island of late — that the Providence city center can be restored and made viable. And if more of the downtown interests would feel the same, then it could happen.

Duany's final report in January will be eagerly awaited.

Chester E. Smolski is professor of geography and director of Urban Studies at Rhode Island College.